

Online Education Programs

State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA)

Through the act Sec. 3 20-A MRSA §405, sub-§3, ¶W the 127th Maine Legislature, authorized the State Board of Education to participate in the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) through the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). Thus the Maine Department of Education (Maine DOE) is the new portal agency for SARA

SARA is an agreement among its member states, districts and U.S. territories that establishes comparable national standards for interstate offerings of postsecondary distance-education courses and programs. It is intended to make it easier for students to take online courses offered by postsecondary institutions in a state other than the one where they reside. SARA is overseen by a nation council and administered by four regional higher education compacts, with the New England Board of Higher Education being the regional entity for the State of Maine.

Sara Consumer Protection Provisions

SARA consumer protection provisions require the home state - Maine, through the Maine DOE to investigate and resolve allegations of dishonest or fraudulent activity by a provider, including the provision of false or misleading information.

SARA policies and standards, including those for consumer protection and the resolution of complaints, apply to interstate distance education offered by participating SARA institutions to students in other SARA states. Only those complaints resulting from distance education courses offered by participating institutions to students in other SARA states come under the terms of the agreement. Complaints about a SARA institution's in-state operations are to be resolved under the state's provisions, not those of SARA.

Consumer protection within SARA, in addition to dealing with alleged fraudulent activity, also provides for the investigation and resolution of complaints that an institution is operating a course or program contrary to practices set forth by the Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education in such a way that a student is harmed. Examples of issues that may arise in regard to alleged fraudulent activity or more general complaints include, but are not limited to:

- Veracity of recruitment and marketing materials;
- Accuracy of job placement data;
- Accuracy of information about tuition, fees and financial aid;
- Complete and accurate admission requirements for courses and programs;
- Accuracy of information about the institution's accreditation and/or any programmatic/specialized accreditation held by the institution's programs;
- Accuracy of information about whether course work meets any relevant professional licensing requirements or the requirements of specialized accrediting bodies;
- Accuracy of information about whether the institution's course work will transfer to other institutions; and

- Operation of distance education programs consistent with practices expected by institutional accreditors (and, if applicable, programmatic/specialized accreditors) and/or the Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of distance education.

Resolution Steps for Complaints

Complaints against an institution operating under SARA go first through the institution's own procedures for resolution of grievances. Institutions operating under SARA are required to make their own complaint resolution policies and procedures and the SARA complaint resolution policies and procedures readily available to all students taking courses under SARA provisions.

Step 1:

Students should exhaust the formal complaint process of the host institution.

Step 2:

Students should file a complaint through SARA that includes documentation that the student has exhausted the formal complaint process at host postsecondary institution.

Step 3:

The Maine DOE reviews the complaint and supporting any documents. The Maine DOE may request further documentation from the participating SARA institution mentioned in the complaint.

Step 4:

Maine DOE determines if the resolution of the host institution is acceptable. If so, complaint process is concluded and previous resolution is sustained. If the previous resolution is found not acceptable by the Maine DOE, then the complaint will be further investigated until resolved.

Step 5:

Student receives final disposition letter from the Maine DOE.